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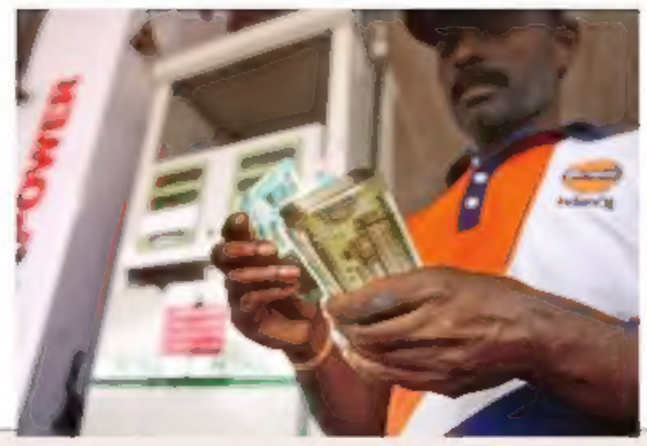

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PETROL PRICE CROSSES ₹100/LTR IN RAJASTHAN

At ₹100.13, a litre of petrol was at its costliest in Sriganganagar town of the western state. In Madhya Pradesh, the rate is ₹99.90

60% OF THE RETAIL COST IS GOVT TAXES

The all-time high price comes weeks after the state slashed 2% VAT on fuel. Still, at 36% after the rate cut, Rajasthan's levy is the highest in India. Diesel in Sriganganagar is at ₹92.13. Central and state taxes make up for as much as 60% of the retail price of petrol and over 54% of diesel. The Centre levies ₹32.90 a litre as excise duty on petrol | P13

MODI BLAMES PREDECESSORS FOR SPIKE

- Petrol rates have risen by ₹19.95 a litre since mid-March '20, after Centre hiked levy to benefit from the fall in international prices
- PM Modi said if previous regimes had focused on reducing India's energy dependence, global fluctuations wouldn't have hurt the middle-class. India imported 85% of fuel in the last financial year

₹92.54

PETROL PRICE IN BENGALURU, IN MUMBAI, IT'S ₹96, DELHI ₹89.54, KOLKATA ₹90.78

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARWAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • WARANGAL • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

FIR says toolkit part of plot to damage India

No names of accused in it; Nikita Jacob gets three-week advance bail from HC

GAYATHRI MANI AND SUDHIR SURYAWANSHI @New Delhi/Mumbai

AN accidentally-leaked toolkit Google doc was not just meant to amplify the ongoing farmers protest, it also contained a detailed plan to wage an economic, social, cultural and regional war against India, if one were to go by the first information report (FIR) the Delhi Police filed on February 4.

The FIR does not name any of the accused, including activists Disha Ravi, Shantanu Muluk and Nikita Jacob, but Disha's arrest and the subsequent actions are on its basis. Disha's advocate got access to the FIR on Wednesday.

Four sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) — 123A, 153, 153A and 120B — pertaining to sedition, criminal conspiracy and creating disharmony or enmity between different groups religious, regional and social groups, have been invoked in the FIR.

The toolkit inadvertantly shared by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg on February 3 is at the centre of the raging controversy.

"A perusal of the said document (toolkit) reveals that it was promoting campaign material by Poetic Justice Foundation (PJF), a Canada-based organization that openly and deliberately shared posts on social media to create disharmony and enmity, hatred and ill-will among different religious, cultural and regional groups," the FIR states.

It claims the January 26 violence was part of a pre-planned conspiracy of the PJF.

In the toolkit, "There a call for economic warfare against India and certain Indian companies. Their assets in India and outside are to be made targets for physical as well as coordinated actions.... The documents specifically mentions targeting certain regions of India to instigate enmity and divide. Further, detailed plans have been made by conspirators to instigate certain communities against one another," the FIR alleged.

'Pre-planned plot'

"It is evident from the contents of the said toolkit that the violence that took place at the streets of Delhi on 26th January 2021 near ITO, at the Red Fort, near Nangloi, etc., as a result of the farmers' protest was a pre-planned conspiracy meant to undermine India's sovereignty and integrity, security of the state and public order," the FIR said

Meanwhile, Mumbai-based advocate Nikita Jacob was given three-week transit anticipatory bail by the Bombay High Court on Wednesday.

While passing the bail order, Justice P D Naik cited the Aurangabad bench order that gave advance bail to another accused Shantanu Muluk the previous day, adding: "It would not be appropriate to make any observations on the merits of the case."

The Delhi Police claim that Disha Ravi and Nikita Jacob were editors of the toolkit created by Shantanu Muluk.

NEET seat scam: I-T raids on med colleges in K'taka

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@Bengaluru /Mangaluru /Tumakuru /Davanagere

IN a major drive against widespread National Entrance Eligibility and Entrance Test (NEET) seat allocation scam, the Directorate of Income Tax (Investigation), Karnataka & Goa on Wednesday conducted search operations at several medical colleges in Bengaluru, Mangaluru, Tumakuru and Davanagere and the premises of their owners, and reportedly seized Rs 18 crore in cash and 60 kg gold.

Explaining the modus operandi adopted by the colleges, sources, who are in the know of the scam, said that the medical colleges put up a "dummy candidate to block the seat for NEET. Once the admissions are over, the seat thus blocked is vacated and auctioned to the highest bidder. The price of a seat in a private medical college is upwards of Rs 1 crore. The fees is collected in cash and so it is not shown as taxable income," said the sources. "This has been going on for the past four to five years," they added.

The institutions colleges that were reportedly searched included BGS, East Point, Akash and Sapthagiri medical colleges in Bengaluru, Sridevi, Kanachur, Yenepoya, Sridevi, AJ Shetty and Srinivasa medical colleges in Mangaluru, Sridevi Group of Institutions in Tumakuru and JJM Medical College, SSIMS and Bapuji Dental Colleges in Davangere.

In Mangaluru, the I-T raids were carried out on the premises of the four colleges and the owners of AJ Shetty Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Centre, Yenepoya Medical College in Deralakatte, Kanachur Institute of Medical Sciences, Natekal, and Srinivas Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Centre, Mukka, said IT department sources.

Sources said that the tax officials had arrived in Mangaluru on Tuesday and had booked rental vehicles under the guise of attending an inter-state football tourney in Kerala. P7

A STARRY NIGHT

Former AICC president Rahul Gandhi, AICC general secretaries Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and K C Venugopal attend the wedding reception of Aishwarya, daughter of KPCC president D K Shivakumar, and Amartya Hegde, son of Cafe Coffee Day founder late V G Siddhartha and grandson of BJP leader S M Krishna, in Bengaluru on Wednesday | EXPRESS | P4

Oppn should not create confusion on Ram Temple donation, says CM

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@Shivamogga

CHIEF Minister B S Yediyurappa on Wednesday cautioned opposition leaders against creating 'unnecessary confusion' over the collection of donation for the construction of Ram Temple at Ayodhya. He warned them that it would lead to contempt of court if the leaders continue to give statements against the temple construction.

Yediyurappa's statement follows recent remarks by Congress Legislature Party leader Siddaramaiah that he will not donate for Ram Temple at Ayodhya, but will part with his money if it is built elsewhere and JDS leader H D Kumaraswamy's comment that those not donating money for the temple were being profiled by the RSS.

CM B S Yediyurappa reads *The New Indian Express*, in Shivamogga on Wednesday | SHIMOGA RAKSHAK

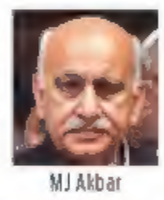
At a foundation-laying ceremony at Machenahalli, near here, Yediyurappa told opposition leaders that it is acceptable if someone does not want to donate for the Ram Temple. "But I would like to tell opposition leaders not to create any confusion over the collection of funds. Those criticising must understand that Hindus, Muslims and Christians are donating," he said.

Delhi court chucks Akbar's defamation suit against Ramani

KANU SARDA @ New Delhi

STRESSING that women cannot be punished for raising their voice against sexual abuse, a Delhi court on Wednesday acquitted journalist Priya Ramani in a defamation suit filed by former Union minister M J Akbar contesting her allegations of sexual harassment by him in the past.

Priya Ramani



MJ Akbar

Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Ravindra Kumar Pandey said, "The right of reputation cannot be protected at the cost of the right of life and dignity of woman as guaranteed in Indian Constitution under Article 21 and right of equality before law and equal protection of law as guaranteed under Article 14 of the Constitution."

The court accepted Ramani's contention that Akbar wasn't a man of stellar reputation. In its 91-page verdict, the court said, "It cannot be ignored that most of the time, the offence of sexual harassment and sexual abuse (was) committed in the close doors or privately. Sometimes the victims herself does not understand what is happening to them or what is happening to them is wrong. Despite how well respected some persons are in the society, they in their personal lives, could show extreme cruelty to females."

The court took note of the systematic abuse at the workplace due to lack of grievance redressal mechanisms at the time Priya Ramani and witness Ghazala Wahab were allegedly sexually harassed.

"Time has come for society to understand sexual abuse and harassment and its implications on the victim," the court said, adding most women do not speak about it because of social stigma.

"This judgment is a validation of the stand taken by us and all women during the #Metoo campaign," Ramani's lawyer Rebecca John later said. Ramani had in 2018 made allegations of sexual harassment against Akbar in wake of the #MeToo movement. P9

RICH HARVEST

Cong sweeps Punjab civic polls; blow to BJP, AAP

HARPREET BAJWA @Chandigarh

AS expected, the ruling Congress swept the civic polls in Punjab held in the backdrop of a prolonged farmers' protests being supported by it.

The Shiromani Akali Dal came a distant second and the BJP came last, with the main opposition AAP faring well below its expectations. The civic polls were held barely a year ahead of the Assembly polls.

The Congress swept seven municipal corporations in the state as it bagged Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala, Abohar, Pathankot, Batala, Moga and Bathinda. It was after decades that the party wrested the Bathinda civic body from the Akali Dal. The results of Mohali Municipal Corporation will be declared on Thursday.

Bathinda Lok Sabha constituency is represented by former Union minister Harsimrat Badal of SAD, which broke off from the NDA last year over the new farm laws.

Punjab CM Capt Amarinder Singh said the victory was due to its "progressive policies".

DCs given power, adoption bottlenecks eased

SUMI SUKANYA DUTTA
@ New Delhi

THE Union Cabinet chaired by PM Narendra Modi on Wednesday approved a key change in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 to authorise deputy commissioners/district magistrates to validate adoptions.

The decision is meant to address the rather slow in-country adoptions in India, as hundreds of prospective parents are forced to wait for years to adopt orphaned or abandoned children. As of now, prospective adoptive parents are required to go to civil or family courts to get the final go-ahead after all formalities are over.

However, with pendency high in civil and family courts, it is not easy to get a date for hearing, said officials in the Central Adoption Resource Agency.

Government figures show that 2,160 adoptions took place in 2020-21, but officials said about 1,000 adoption cases are pending in courts at any given time. "Though the JJ law mandates that courts have to dispose of adoption cases within two months from the date of filing of application, it rarely happens," said an official. "The latest amendment will clear these hindrances."

As per the norms, orphaned and abandoned children are required to be declared legally free for adoption within two months in the case of a child up to the age of two years and within four months in case of a child above the age of two years, after following due procedure. Further, surrendered children are required to be declared legally free for adoption after two months from surrender date.

EXPRESS READ

Tsitsipas stuns Nadal in five-set thriller

Stefanos Tsitsipas came back from two sets down to beat Rafael Nadal in the quarterfinal of the Australian Open. The five setter scoreline read 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (4), 6-4, 7-5 | AFP | P18

Woman gangraped, murdered in Mysuru

Mysuru: A destitute woman was raped and murdered by five men in the heart of Mysuru early on Tuesday morning. The woman, 45, was sleeping on a stone bench when the five men sexually assaulted her and strangled her to death, states the FIR registered on Wednesday. All the five accused have been arrested. The incident was captured on CCTV cameras at the spot. P7

Bengaluru job market opens up for freshers

PEARL MARIA D'SOUZA
@Bengaluru

OVER 15 per cent of all employers across the country intend to hire freshers from February to April 2021, and Bengaluru happens to be a top employer, reveals a study by a private edutech firm. Other cities that offer good employment opportunities are Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Hyderabad.

Information technology, telecommunication, e-commerce and technology startups are the top three sectors hiring. Roles such as web and mobile app development are high in demand across sectors.

Meanwhile, travel and hospitality sectors are still impacted by the Covid pandemic and may have only minimal job opportunities for freshers at present.

The Career Outlook Report that ran an analysis of 815 employers across 18 sectors and 14 cities, estimates 24 per cent hiring intent for freshers. The same estimate before the pandemic struck was 51 per cent, but is still better than the 12-18 per cent hiring intent during the lockdown and unlock phases.

The most ideal courses freshers can look at to improve their employability are automation, software development and graphic designing, it stated. CONTINUED ON: P2

CHEW ON IT

It's 'chicken feed' at Mysuru zoo... tigers turn lazy

A tiger lazes around inside its enclosure in Mysuru Zoo | EXPRESS

AJITH MS @Mysuru

CARNIVORES are the most active and ferocious creatures, but at the Mysuru zoo, they have turned lazy and inactive because of the recent change in their diet to only chicken.

All zoos under the Karnataka Zoo Authority (KZA), including the famous Mysuru zoo, switched to chicken by January-end as the State Government had pushed beef ban through an ordinance.

Karnataka has the highest number of zoos in the country and the Mysuru zoo has a host of carnivores, including exotic cats like cheetahs, white tigers, jaguars along with over a dozen Royal Bengal tigers, two dozen leopards as well as wolves and foxes.

Before switching over chicken, the zoo used to procure 350 kg of beef a day to feed the carnivores. Now with the diet switch, the animals have become less active and tend to relax for more hours than the usual long hours that carnivores, especially big cats, rest for, zoo sources said. The authorities tried mutton as an alternative, but as the carnivores refused to eat even small quantities, they had to opt for farm chicken.

Under the new anti-cow slaughter law, buffalo meat is allowed, but it is not available in large enough quantities. Since the cost of country chicken is on the higher side, the zoos are dependent on farm poultry.

The authorities said that except for birds like vultures all other carnivores have shown reduced activity. "To an extent, leopards are not that inactive. But even foxes and hyenas, which move about more than big cats, are showing lesser activity," said the sources.

When beef was on the menu, big cats would leave 3 kg of bones from an average of 14 kg fed to them, but when 8 kg of chicken is being given, they are leaving behind 2 kg of bones. The zoo staff is worried about the effects of prolonged diet of chicken on carnivores.

KZA Member Secretary B P Ravi said that they are waiting for an exemption from the government to supply beef to zoos.

Animal Husbandry Minister Prabhu Chauhan said they have not received complaints on scarcity of food at zoos. He said they will take action if authorities give details.